

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



# He Zhen and Anarcha-Feminism in China

Peter Zarrow

Peter Zarrow

He Zhen and Anarcha-Feminism in China

November 1988

<https://libcom.org/history/he-zhen-anarcha-feminism-china>

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)

November 1988



## Contents

The Background: Late Qing Feminism . . . . .	6
Women: Dependency and Labor . . . . .	13
Tradition and Confucianism . . . . .	19
Sexuality and the Family . . . . .	22
Liberation and Anarchism . . . . .	26



rejected. Communist feminists, a number of whom had studied anarchism, agreed that women had to organize themselves, that they faced a double oppression of male domination and class subordination.

The Chinese Communist party clearly linked women's liberation to a complete rejection of traditional society.

He Zhen's vision was of individual women who had achieved autonomy and therefore remained within or rejoined the larger community. Their liberation was not that of the individual from society; it could only be achieved by the liberation of society as a whole. The significance of anarcho-feminism lay in its rigorous if sometimes simplistic analysis of Chinese social structure and cultural constrictions. He Zhen sought not merely the gains of women in the West, but much more: not reform but revolution. At the same time anarcho-feminists spoke to all Chinese women. Even if rather more moderate, they could appreciate the anarchist sense of perfectibility. The powerful and affecting prose that He Zhen was capable of producing stands as one of the significant achievements of Chinese feminism before the 1911 Revolution.

Revolution made a significant contribution to Chinese feminism. They linked feminism to their call for a complete social revolution; they understood the oppression of women in China to be linked to modern class divisions and economic exploitation as well as traditional culture. They discussed the relationships among feminism, individual rights, and political liberties. He Zhen in particular severed feminism from nationalism, proclaiming "women's liberation" not "for the sake of the nation" but out of moral necessity.

Until 1907 virtually all Chinese feminism was nationalistic. Indeed, modern Chinese feminism was born in the struggle for national independence. From the early 1890s feminists had emphasized that a free and equal female citizenry was necessary for China to achieve true national sovereignty. The content of this feminism was perhaps radical for its day: feminist demands included the end to footbinding and the right to modern education. But the form of this feminism was confined to China-as-nation: changes were needed ultimately not for the sake of Chinese women but for the sake of Chinese wealth and power.

Perhaps feminist movements in modernizing nations go through parallel, overlapping stages. In Russia a reformist, elite feminism arose in the 1850s and was soon rivaled by a "nihilist response," which extended the "woman question" to personal emancipation and sexual equality, and a "radical response," which emphasized coordinated political action. Similarly, in Japan women emerged by the 1870s into public discourse as "good wives, wise mothers"—the nurturers of the nation. During the popular rights movement, Japanese women claimed a public role and demanded from the government divorce laws, modern education, and the vote as a matter of "natural rights, liberty, and equality". Even the United States passed through a stage of woman as national mother.

In China feminism became linked to revolutionary concerns at an earlier stage (although later in time than in Russia or Japan) as the anti-Manchu movement got under way after 1902. Nonetheless, it was still construed within discourse about the nation and

thus was considered secondary. Anarcha-feminism was free from this limitation, but it was still embedded in a larger political context. The anarchists spoke less of women's rights as an independent variable and more of how the liberation of one oppressed element in society depended on the liberation of all. Thus the anarchist position on women contributed to freeing Chinese feminism from the demands of nationalism while the cause of women remained indissolubly connected to the larger liberation of society as a whole, rather than a separate, independently achievable goal.

Similarly, feminism in contemporary China stands in ambiguous relation to the larger goals of the socialist state.

I first give a synopsis of the women's movement to 1907, when Chinese anarchism was born. Then I discuss the anarchists' views of the relationship between economics and the oppression of women, of the role of Chinese tradition, and of the problems of sexuality and the family. Finally, I briefly point out the significance of women's "liberation" to the anarchist theory of revolution.

## The Background: Late Qing Feminism

Modern feminism arose in China in association with the reform movement of the mid-1890s. A growing number of feminists, men and women located in the cities of the littoral, especially Shanghai, were struck by the plight of Chinese women—and the ways in which they were holding back national progress. Traditionally, the new feminists concluded, China was blatantly male-dominated and patriarchal. By late imperial times women almost universally had their feet bound at a younger age; their legal independence was precarious; they were expected to remain "chaste" (widows, at least in the gentry, were not expected to remarry) whereas men were considerably freer; and socially they were subject to the "three followings": subservient in turn to father, husband, and son. Even if a few women could break out of this system, the inferior position of

The Chinese anarchists went beyond any utilitarian argument to teach that human rights, including women's rights, were not contingent. He Zhen in particular taught that women needed to free themselves. They faced a paradox: on the one hand, if the essence of sexual inequality lay in the economic dependence of women on men, then raising the economic position of women offered some hope; on the other, if the natures of feudalism and capitalism were hierarchical, economic betterment could only affect a few. Virtually alone among their generation, the anarchists thus promoted a thoroughgoing social revolution. Their view of the human predicament did not ultimately allow a separate sphere for women's interests but focused on women as one of a number of historically oppressed groups. It was women's natures as humans that entitled them to rights and brought them into a discourse about liberty and equality: women were inherently neither better nor worse than men.

Was He Zhen read? If so, what was her influence and that of the other anarchists on the course of Chinese feminism? The influence of anarcho-feminism in China, like that of anarchism in general, must be sought in the long term, not the short, and often in fundamental attitudes rather than political expressions. The anarcho-feminist understanding that structural social change was needed was widely accepted after the 1911 Revolution. Although Chinese women continued to stress the importance of women's rights to the health of a nation beset with external threats and internal problems, they also issued ever harsher condemnations of traditional morality, "superstitions," and the fundamentals of male dominance.

He Zhen's reputation is as one of the founders of Chinese feminism, although little is actually known about her.<sup>13</sup> Even if she did not have many followers, her views echo in May Fourth writings and the speculations of Communist feminists about the relationship between a general political struggle and women's liberation. In the 1920s not just footbinding, the "three followings," and polygamy but also filial piety, marriage, and even the family were

it seems likely that her views were highly colored by her education. Although the exact content of that education is unknown, it may be speculated that her emphasis on unselfish devotion to the community, her criticisms of utilitarianism, and her thoughts about the real nature of liberty and equality reflected long-standing concerns of Chinese political discourse. Utopianism was only a minor strand of Neo-Confucianism, the dominant political philosophy since Song times, but the Neo-Confucian concern with individual responsibility to self and society is echoed in He Zhen's comments on women's responsibilities. Fundamentally the Neo-Confucians viewed social change as resting on individual self-improvement.

The first text to be studied in the traditional curriculum, the *Daxue* (Great learning), firmly linked the arts of self-cultivation (individual) and governance (social). According to the commentary of Zhu Xi (1130-1200), a work studied on a virtually universal basis, in ancient times the aristocracy and gifted commoners were "instructed in the Way of probing principle, setting the mind in the right, cultivating oneself, and governing others."<sup>12</sup> More interested in ethics than in metaphysics, He Zhen seemed to combine a sense of impersonal economic forces with an even stronger sense of the subjectivity of social change.

The marriage between feminism and anarchism was consummated in a revolution against all forms of inequality and unfreedom. In He Zhen's words,

What we mean by equality between the sexes is not just that men will no longer oppress women. We also want men no longer to be oppressed by other men and women no longer to be oppressed by other women[...] Thus, women should completely overthrow rulership, force men to abandon all their special privileges and become equal to women, and make a world with neither the oppression of women nor the oppression of men.

women was nonetheless taken for granted. Although in earlier eras literati had occasionally expressed concern over women's place in the family, suicide, footbinding, and education, not until the waning years of the Qing dynasty was a serious challenge to social and cultural norms of male dominance mounted and were women themselves involved.<sup>1</sup> Yet the thrust of the movement remained largely nationalist. The feminist argument ultimately rested not on justice or self-evident rights but on China's need to include its women in order to "save the nation" (*jiuguo*).

The reformer Kang Youwei organized an antfootbinding society in 1892, and by the end of the decade tens of thousands of members belonged to such societies, the men promising that their sons would marry only women with natural feet. Women were charged with the task of bearing and raising the nation's youth and could be neither maimed nor ignorant. Kang's disciple Liang Qichao, in his *Bianfa tongyi* (General discussion of reform), published serially during 1896-97, included a section on women's education (*bin ni xue*) that put the issue in the context of China's pressing need to make its women productive members of society. Liang connected dependence and idleness—a theme the anarchists later picked up. He claimed that nations were well off when everyone was employed and thus self-sufficient.

But if this cannot be brought about, then the number of unemployed can be taken as an inverse ratio of the nation's strength. Why is this? Because the unemployed have to depend on the employed for their support. Without such support, the unemployed will fall into danger. With the support, the employed will fall into danger.

---

<sup>1</sup> For analyses of this first stage of the self-conscious women's movement, see Bao 1979a; Beahan 1981; Chen 1967; Drucker 1981; Li 1981; Lin 1979; Ono 1968 and Rankin 1975.

How can the nation be strengthened? If the people are enriched, the country will be strengthened. How can the people be enriched? By making everyone self-sufficient and by not relying on one person to support many.

Although the fault lay with men's monopolizing employment, women were holding China back. Women were treated like "beasts and slaves" precisely because they depended on men—but men also suffered from the burden of having to support dependents. Liang pointed out that women were idle and disparaged, whereas men labored and were honored. The cure for all of these problems lay in women's education, which would ultimately strengthen China.

The concern with nationalism continued, even among women leaders, in the early years of the twentieth century. In Shanghai, where criticism of the Manchus for their failure to protect China's sovereignty was sharpest, a number of women's journals were founded between 1902 and 1911, and the revolutionary Patriotic Girls' School (*Aiguo nu xuexiao*) briefly joined the ranks of missionary and other schools for women. There, Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940; the future head of Beijing University) taught the history of the French Revolution and claimed that women were especially suited for assassination work. Qiu Jin, who died a martyr to the revolution in 1907, had perhaps begun to temper nationalist rhetoric with a larger concern for justice and equality with men during her stay in Tokyo (1904-5). Yet she clearly identified herself as a patriot first. On the conservative side, some called for women's education to promote traditional virtues. Nonetheless, the trend was to speak of the promise of women's rights and to contrast a future of justice with the reality of their current sufferings, all within the larger context of China's need to utilize the abilities of its women to avoid disaster. Chinese feminist revolutionaries often pointed out that the repeated calls of their male comrades for China's "four hundred million" to awake were meaningless without special attention to its most backward "two hundred million."

detail the parliaments of various nations; her conclusions might be summarized "all government corrupts and democratic governments corrupt more," as when socialists joined the government and forgot their former principles. He Zhen thought that women who managed to join a government would not do much better. She believed a few women might join the ruling class, but change could only come from the outside. When upper-class women joined governments, they joined men as an oppressive force. She found that, even if successful, any attempts to rein in the aristocracy or gain privileges equal to men's (like the vote) by using government would leave oppressive governments still more powerful. He Zhen understood rulership and male dominance as operating together, so they should be overthrown together.

He Zhen sought no authority in China's past for her call for equality, and she acknowledged none. She grounded her call for revolution in a transcendent sense of justice and sexual equality. Nevertheless, her ability to quote from the classics and more recent Confucian texts to make her historical points is evidence that she had a thorough traditional education, which must have included the Confucian classics, women's manuals, and a good deal of literature.<sup>10</sup> It probably did not include much philosophical exegesis, *kaozheng* studies, or New Text interpretations. She did not show the same wide-ranging knowledge of noncanonical traditions that Liu Shipai displayed, nor do her writings indicate any interest in the "national essence." Compared to Liu, she seems more at home in what might be called the world of neologisms—she did not seek traditional equivalents for such terms as freedom, liberation, equality, socialism, communism, and individual.

However, given her familiarity with Chinese philosophy and literature and her evidently limited knowledge of Western sources,

---

<sup>10</sup> Her wide-ranging discussion of the history of women in China displayed a great deal of erudition; see "Niizi fuchou lun" (Women's revenge), TYB, 7-23, 65-70, and "Niizi shuochou lun" (Women articulate their enmity), TYB, 205-11.

women struggling for liberation with their own might. What is "being a passive agent"? It is men's granting liberation to women. When we look at the liberation of Chinese women today, most of it has come about from being passive and less of it from being active agents. What active forces there have been have come from men, and as a result the benefits to women have not equaled those garnered by men.

When He Zhen turned her attention to the West, she recognized some of the ways in which it was moving toward women's liberation. Monogamy, civil marriage, and divorce won her qualified praise, even though they clearly did not go far enough even in theory, much less practice. She also approved of coeducation and allowing boys and girls to mix socially. In the end, however, He Zhen found that none of this represented the liberation of women except in the most superficial way. Chinese feminists could not assume that the path of liberation had already been forged in the West. He Zhen also distrusted reforms. To refute the reformist quest to give women economic independence through jobs, she contrasted individual (*geren*) and group (*quanti*) economic independence.

On an individual basis, "economic independence" simply meant that a given woman had some freedom of action, but it did not affect the majority of women. As long as a small body of rich people monopolized the organs of production and unemployment was rising, "economic independence" remained merely a slogan meant to disguise wage slavery. To have a few women join the working class would not challenge sexual inequality. True economic independence for women (or, better, everyone) lay for He Zhen only in anarcho-communism.

Political reform was no better than economic reform because the lower classes would be at the mercy of the capitalists, who would control their voting. People dependent on others for their living had to do what they were told. He Zhen examined in some

In 1904 Jin Yi, styling herself a "lover of freedom," published a translation of Kemuriyama Sentaro's *Kinsei museifushugi* (Modern anarchism), which later had a vogue under the title of *Ziyou xue*.

("Jin Yi" was probably Jin Tianhe, who had been involved with the Patriotic Girls' School and helped Zou Rong publish his notorious attack on the Manchus, "Revolutionary Army.") In 1903 Jin had published *Niijie zhong* (Women's bell) in Shanghai.

Her understanding of women's rights was uncompromising. She rigorously condemned the wrongs done to Chinese women such as footbinding, criticized superstitions and called for good conduct in this life, and encouraged women to adopt a simpler life-style by abandoning their jewelry and elegant (and time-consuming) clothing. More to the point, perhaps, she demanded a recognition of women's rights to education, business, property, free marriage, and friendship and to become politically involved.

Although Jin may have been intrigued by anarchism, *Women's Bell* called for political changes and still conceived of feminism only within a larger nationalist context.

Since ancient times the extinction of races and the destruction of nations have been self-inflicted, not caused by outsiders. By opium smoking and footbinding, Chinese men and women, each in their own way, are becoming more and more like wild animals and ghosts and will of themselves soon lose their spirit and cut off the ancestral succession.

By 1904 the journal *Jiangsu* could call for "family revolution," although a familiar chain of reasoning brought the author to the conclusion that family revolution would save both Chinese national sovereignty and the Chinese people. *Niizi shijie* (Women's world), a journal published in Shanghai between 1904 and 1906, claimed that women had both "natural rights" and the capacity to join the Darwinian struggle for survival. "Thus, in civilized nations men and

women are valued equally, learning advances constantly, and the nation is strengthened daily". After all, women were clearly "the mothers of the citizenry". Liang Qichao's very language was still being used nearly a decade later: Chinese women were, alas, dependents and thus through no fault of their own continued to be idle consumers rather than producers.

In 1906 about seventy Chinese in Tokyo organized the Association of Women Students in Japan (Liu-Ri niixuesheng hui) under the leadership of Yan Wu (b. 1869) and others, and during the first half of 1907 they published six issues of *Zhongguo xinnujie zazhi* (New Chinese women's world; Li 1981:205-41). This group was considerably less radical than the anarcha-feminist group organized in mid-1907, but it shared a number of concerns with the anarchists. By its second issue *Women's World* was proclaiming its allegiance to new theories concerning women and "new civilization" (xin wen-ming); to morality, education, and the destruction of traditional ignorance; and to the construction of a new society. Yet this approach was gradualist if not exactly moderate. Education remained the key: not education in the sense of revolutionary propaganda or education related to a radical analysis of society, but schools to teach simple literacy and more advanced skills; education like that available to men, rather than the new education for both sexes that the anarchists promoted.

To an extent, the argument through nationalism was instrumental—a convenient means for promoting such goals as economic rights, independence from the family, and political rights; that is, for promoting complete equality with men. During the heyday of the imperialist scramble for concessions in the early twentieth century, the argument that China needed the support of its women, who therefore had to be unshackled, might have appealed to otherwise conservative men.

The nationalist-feminists' sharp criticism of the old order perhaps made anarchist analysis seem less shocking than it might otherwise have been. But the "new morality" of an enlightened "fe-

pendence (zili), including free marriage (or companionship, peihe), if they could achieve economic equality. Li traced the current forms of economic inequality—and hence servitude in marriage—to law and ultimately to government. Thus, "a revolution that overthrows government is an important requisite for a woman's revolution," which can finally lead to the "freedom and self-sufficiency [ziyou zidel of women." Li summarized his view of women's priorities in a chart (fig. 1). He stressed the practical importance of ideology, seeming almost to consider truth itself a force. Overall his analysis had much in common with that of Liu Shiwei and He Zhen, but Li emphasized the role of cultural factors. "Science" led to freedom.

He Zhen and Liu Shiwei, on the other hand, argued that total revolution offered hope. Given time, the "whole people" (quantu zhi min) would free itself.

Their call for men and women—and peasants and workers—to revolt was an important exception to the general idea of the time that change would come to China at the hands of students or secret societies or the new armies or even the gentry.<sup>9</sup> He Zhen never clearly explained how the world was to be changed. Nonetheless, she fundamentally believed that women had to liberate themselves.

Chinese society in recent years has seen a little liberation of women. But has this women's liberation truly come from women's being active agents [zhudongzhe]—or from their being passive agents [fubeidongzhe]? What is "being an active agent"? It is

---

a part of the anarchists' antagonism to the "boundaries" that Kang Youwei had first attacked, but I think she errs in emphasizing the anarchists' belief in the "autonomous individual" and "the emancipation of the individual from all group attachment," because the anarchists were also driven by a compelling egalitarianism and put their faith in comradeship rather than individualism.

<sup>9</sup> Especially significant was Liu's emphasis on the role of the peasantry; see "Wuzhengfu geming yu nongmin geming" (Anarchist revolution and peasant revolution), in Ge et al. 1984:158-62 (originally published in *Hengbao*, no. 7, June 28, 1908).

cussion of sexual relations. Li attempted to simplify sexual relations by reducing them to an aspect of biology. He urged moderation between pairs of consenting adults of the opposite sex. Li first analogized machines and the human body: as a lamp needed oil, so the body needed food and drink. Then he pointed out, "Although the relations between the sexes are not the same as food and drink, they too are rooted in biology. Food and drink supplement a lack in the body's constitution, whereas copulation reduces the fullness of the body's constitution. When the need is for supplement, then hunger arises; when the need is for reduction, then sexual desire arises." Does this echo Daoist sex manuals or the rebellion against Victorian shibboleths? As long as two people were in good health and "of suitable age," Li believed, their mutual love (xiang'ai) constituted a moral (gongdao) relationship.<sup>8</sup>

[8]"Huai'jia lun" (Destroy the family), TYB, no. 4 (July 25, 1907), in Zhang and Wang 1978, 2B:916-17. I think the article, signed "A member of the Han race" (Han yi), is by Liu Shipai.

Xin ski writers, like He Zhen, realized that as long as the rearing of children remained in the hands of the family, women would have difficulty breaking out. Thus the group should assume the responsibility of raising and educating children. In their own lives, Wu Zhihui showed no signs of dissatisfaction with his fairly traditional family, whereas Li Shizeng was married three times, the last occasion at the age of seventy-six. Although He Zhen's rumored affairs may have had something to do with her internal conflict between libertinism and free love, this remains speculative.

<https://coinsh.red/ipfs/QmU6pLatWoTo5AF8cSDq4Rdzsya9fG7NppjG>

## Liberation and Anarchism

Li Shizeng, for one, specifically called for a "women's revolution." He believed that women could achieve freedom (ziyou) and inde-

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Furth (1983:384) has usefully suggested that antifamilialism was

male citizenry" stopped short of advocating, as anarchist morality would, a thoroughgoing family revolution or a revolution against the "three bonds" (ruler-subject, parent-child, husband-wife) of Confucianism. If "mainstream" feminists were becoming radicalized, they still were not able to work out the tensions between the demands of nationalism and feminism.

A distinct current of anarcha-feminism emerged from the Chinese anarchist movement within two groups of exiles between 1906 and 1911. These exiles were intellectuals whose critique of Chinese society pivoted on the dichotomy between oppression and freedom, and their concerns included equality for women. He Zhen, the wife of Liu Shipai, particularly stressed the centrality of women's liberation in any true revolution.<sup>2</sup> Together with Liu and the longtime revolutionary Zhang Ji, she founded the Tianyi bao (Journal of natural justice) in Tokyo in 1907. Natural Justice emphasized feminism as much as anarchism and was China's premier feminist journal during its year and a half of publication. The anarchist Xin shiji (New century) in Paris also gave a certain amount of attention to equality for women and to the "family revolution."

The anarchists formed a sort of left-wing caucus within the Chinese revolutionary movement; they criticized militarism and nationalism, predicted world revolution in the near future, introduced both Kropotkin and Marx, promoted science, and condemned superstition and traditional morality. Many of their opinions foreshadowed the cultural iconoclasm of the May Fourth (1919) era, and they urged social as well as political revolution, including both workers and peasants. They called for an absolute end to hierarchical social systems—even the most basic of Chinese institutions, the family. Their important writings appeared in 1907 and 1908.

<sup>2</sup> Liu (1884-1919) was a famous classical scholar in the Hanxue Old Text tradition; he converted to the anti-Manchu cause in 1903 and proclaimed himself to be an anarchist in 1907 before switching back to Qing loyalism by 1909. He Zhen's life remains quite obscure; see below for reports about her.

The Tokyo to which He Zhen and Liu Shipei fled in 1907 (in some trouble because of Liu's anti-Manchu diatribes) was a lively place for perhaps eight thousand Chinese students and exiles centered in the Kanda district. Daughters and wives often accompanied the students, and at least one hundred women were formally enrolled in Japanese schools. Liu was soon in contact with the famous Japanese anarchist Kritoku Shasui. He also wrote for *Minbao* (People's journal) of the Tongmenghui (Revolutionary Alliance), which possibly provided the family with its income. He Zhen soon organized the Niizi Fuquan Hui (Women's Rights Recovery Association). These small groups comprised at least the core of the audience for anarcho-feminism.

The Women's Rights Recovery Association called for the forcible suppression of male privilege and "interference" with the women who submitted to oppression. Society, the ruling class, and capitalists were to be resisted. The association's bylaws prohibited supporting governments, acting in subservience to men, and becoming a concubine or second wife. The section on behavior, heavily influenced by traditional morality, demanded that members persevere through hardships, brave dangers, know shame, respect the larger community (*guigong*), and rectify themselves (*zhengshen*). By way of benefits, the association would come to the aid of any member oppressed by her husband or attempting to resist male dominance in any way.

Little is known of the association or of He Zhen's life. Originally named He Ban, she was born to a Jiangsu family evidently of some means. Liu's ancestral home was also in Jiangsu, and He's sister was married to Liu's brother, a common enough arrangement between families. She certainly had considerable education, displaying in her feminist essays some knowledge of the classics and wide familiarity with traditional Chinese literature. She and Liu were married in 1903, and Liu took his bride to Shanghai, where he worked for radical causes and she studied at the Patriotic Women's School. In Tokyo she adopted the personal name Zhen (thunderclap). She

The views of the male anarchists on these intimate questions differed slightly. One article in *Natural Justice* not only called for the abolition of the family but also claimed that social revolution itself must start with a "sexual revolution." More of a brief cry of anguish than an argued essay, the article found that the root of sexual revolution lay in destroying the family, which had given rise to selfishness, male dominance, patriarchy, private property, and other unnatural perversities. Without the family system to rely on, men would be unable to suppress women, and the people would be public spirited (*gong*) rather than selfish (*si*). The author's unstated premise was a historical linkage among family, patriarchal dominance, particularism, and private property (including women and children) and therefore a general system of selfish competition that might or might not include capitalism—all in contrast to the earlier natural man of Rousseau or Zhuangzi.

Wu Zhihui (1865-1953), an iconoclastic revolutionary promoting anarchism from Paris, once noted that men and women should join each other purely out of love; he even believed that the children born of such a relationship would be superior to those from an arranged marriage and that those from a racially mixed alliance would be better yet. Wu wanted to abolish marriage and allow both partners freedom within a relationship and freedom to leave it.

Li Shizeng attacked the traditional Chinese family mercilessly. He ridiculed ancestor worship, which he saw as just another prop for authority rooted in superstition. He pointed out that his distant ancestors included monkeys and other animals. Li did not blame his own ignorant ancestors for starting ancestor worship and other religious forms, but in the light of modern science "the people who don't advocate ancestor revolution are either stupid or selfish." In terms of action, Li urged that all rites surrounding ancestors be ignored, even to the point of abandoning funeral ceremonies, that grave mounds be leveled, and that spirit tablets be destroyed. In terms of analysis, Li used his customary categories—superstition (related to authority) and science (related to freedom)—in his dis-

Sexuality was ultimately a secondary issue to He Zhen. She evidently thought the problems of sexual morality would be solved in the course of the anarchist revolution.

"For thousands of years this has been a world of rulership (*frenzhi*) and a world of class systems, and therefore the world has become the exclusive property of men. To correct this fault it is necessary to abolish rulership, practice human equality, and make the world something shared by both men and women. To do this it is necessary to start with women's liberation".

Similarly He Zhen took for granted the demise of the family, not discussing its future but contenting herself with condemning its past. She specifically and repeatedly criticized such institutions as polygamy, concubinage, and the authority of the mother-in-law; her indictment of Confucianism entailed a critique of the traditional family.

(Nor were Western nations, with their emphasis on marrying for money, any better.)

As an economic unit, the family would lose most of its point when goods were shared equally among all members of the larger society.

He Zhen believed that freeing women from the burden of raising their children was one of the key elements in achieving equality. She liked the notion of raising all infants in public nurseries, since men were already free of this task.

Because He Zhen thought that the theory behind male dominance rested on the assumption that women could not fulfill certain tasks as well as men, she foresaw its destruction when women were allowed to work freely. Men would no longer depend on their wives to manage the household, and women would no longer depend on their husbands for economic survival. In other words, the family as an institution marked by biological reproduction, the strict sexual division of labor, and continuation of the family line would no longer exist. Economics, not customs or morals, remained the key to her analysis.

was also rumored to have had an affair with "the Chinese Byron," Su Manshu. Cai Yuanpei blamed He Zhen for Liu's betrayal of the revolution, whereas Feng Ziyou claimed that the Manchus bribed her to incite Liu to leave the Tongmenghui. However, their views show more about male perceptions of He Zhen than they shed light on historical fact; neither man was in Tokyo at the time. The logic of Liu's anarchism might have led him to support a laissez-faire Manchu government as easily as he could the revolutionaries with their dreams of national power amid the reality of squalid infighting. Liu is often pictured as henpecked (Liu Xinhuang, yet He Zhen was apparently heartbroken by his death.

## Women: Dependency and Labor

He Zhen expected women to free themselves; no one would give them their rights. Thus she often adopted a critical and admonitory stance toward her fellow women. But her most basic emotions were pity and outrage. A brief but powerful vernacular catechism, "Women Ought to Know About Communism," summarizes He Zhen's idealism. "What's the most important thing in all the world?" she opens. "It's eating.

Why do you women allow people to mistreat you? Because you depend on others to eat". Following Liang Qichao's basic model of dependence, He Zhen saw different causes at work: not male dominance but the unequal distribution of wealth. Or to put it another way, male dominance operated through the unequal distribution of wealth, which led to relationships of dependent and master.

He Zhen singled out three groups of women as particularly unfortunate—house- maids, factory workers, and prostitutes. Maids were constantly terrorized by their employers, beaten, cursed, and made to work day and night. They could not even think of resisting. "What are the reasons for this? It's because the masters have money and I depend on them for eating." Women

workers filled the textile factories of Shanghai. They too worked long hours, had no freedom, and were growing blind and bent.

"What are the reasons for this? It's because the factory owners have money and I depend on them for eating." Finally, prostitutes were "beaten by the turtle-heads,"<sup>3</sup> called whores, and looked down on. In Shanghai, the "wild chickens" stood on the streets half the night, in the wind and snow, waiting for customers. "What are the reasons for this? It's because people with money take me and buy me, and I depend on this kind of business for eating".

In addition to working women, He Zhen believed that wives and concubines also suffered mistreatment, and for the same reason: they depended on men to eat. He Zhen noted that widows were supposed to be prohibited from remarriage. But whereas very few rich widows died in the defense of their virtue, many poor ones died if they had no children to support them. Even if not faced with starvation, their lives were so miserable that they wanted to die. The peasant women who had to work in the fields and raise silkworms also suffered greatly. And, He Zhen stated, marriage simply meant that women could not protest even when their husbands beat them for no reason.

Women got married "truly not because of the appearance of the man but because of the appearance of a rice bowl." However, He Zhen demanded:

You women, do not hate the man: hate that you don't have food to eat. Why don't you have food to eat? Because you can't buy food without money. Why don't you have money? Because the rich have stolen our property and walk all over the majority of the people. The poor don't even have food [But] some don't have to worry about going without food. Why do you have to worry about starvation everyday? The poor are peo-

---

<sup>3</sup> Colloquial for penises.

and presaged social revolution. On the other, the proper morality for individual behavior during and after the struggle was far from clear.

He Zhen could be quite critical of her own sex. The traditional isolation of women, at least in the middle classes and above, had led to superficiality, idleness, and "lascivious behavior". As long as parents arranged marriages, many women would never find happiness and some would even be driven to murder their husband and children.

This proves that the system of isolating women will never stop their sexual drives (yin) [...] The people who are horrified by women's liberation and think that after liberation women will behave more wantonly, restrict them more and more tightly. Thus the idea of restricting women grows daily, but it is when there is little hope of liberation that wantonness arises... wantonness arises out of isolation, not out of liberation.

But this call for liberation was tempered with a warning. Today women "are drunk with freedom and equality and will not accept any restraint". He Zhen criticized women who appeared to be activists but were really seeking a pretext for shocking and wanton practices. The very term yin was heavily weighted with disapproval, and in effect He Zhen was complaining that sex could compete with the true goals of social transformation. This sounds surprisingly repressed. He Zhen evidently thought women had been suppressed so long and sexuality used so long by men as a tool of oppression that women's liberation could not take sexual liberation at face value. She was also aware of the role class played in sexual exploitation, especially in concubinage and prostitution. However, He Zhen believed that a truly liberated woman would be free to have many lovers.

to make themselves wise while they condemn women to ignorance[...] The right of women to leave (their husbands) is in the hands of men[...] Husbands can divorce their wives, but wives cannot divorce their husbands.

He Zhen's participation in elite culture is obvious here. She believed that men had monopolized learning throughout Chinese history, and so the great works of all the ages insulted women. "Sly people used these doctrines to pursue their own advantage, while the stupid believed them as they would believe superstitions. There is no telling how many of our women died because of them. Thus all of the learning of Confucianism is the learning of murder". Song Confucians went so far as to say that starving to death was of minor importance, but losing one's chastity was a terrible thing. "The words 'virtuous' and 'pure' were enough to kill".

Nonetheless He Zhen was concerned here with all women, not just the elite. Women's biology of reproduction was a factor, but the main mechanisms for their oppression were cultural. Chinese women had internalized patriarchal values.

However, although He Zhen was not entirely consistent, values probably remained for her a secondary consideration. Oppression could be enforced through culture but remained economically rooted. Even elite women were expected to work in the home while their husbands whored around.

## Sexuality and the Family

He Zhen seems to have had an easier time coming to a critical understanding of Chinese society and traditional culture than of sexuality. She foresaw a day of complete freedom for women—even in sexual relations—and of equality between men and women; at the same time she was wary of contemporary calls for sexual freedom. On the one hand, feminism threatened the entire class system

ple and the rich are people. Think about it for yourself; this ought to produce some disquieting feelings.

Turning to the modern economy, He Zhen countered the argument that women could become independent by learning trades. In this scheme the middle class would send its daughters to school for academic and vocational training, and after marriage these women could become teachers. They would not have to depend on men for their livelihood. And poor families could send their daughters to work in the factories, without fearing that they would become servants or prostitutes. He Zhen thought that this argument, at best, did not go far enough, because it took a great deal of money to open a school or a factory; in the one case, women depended on the school's founders for their livelihood, and in the other, they depended on the owners of the factory. And "as long as they depend on others for food, they will have absolutely no freedom [ziyou)."

The crucial point for He Zhen was that these women lacked independence, even with skills, given the existing economic structure of society. They were subject to the factory or school closing, to being fired because someone disliked them, to being unneeded. "Thus, this matter of depending on others for food is fraught with danger." But He Zhen had a solution:

Don't rely on other people. There will be food naturally. What is this solution? Practicing communism [gongchan). Think of the various objects in the world. They were not made by heaven but by individual people. Why can people with money buy them but people without money can't? Because the world uses money; because when people buy something they make it into their private property. All women know that nothing is more evil than money. Everyone, become of one mind! Unite with men and completely overthrow the upper classes and the rich! Then money will be abol-

ished. Nothing will be regarded as an individual's private property. All items that are eaten, worn, or used—everything—will be put somewhere so that everyone who has performed some labor, men and women alike, can take whatever and however much they want. It will be like picking water out of the sea: this is called communism. At this time, not only will eating not require reliance on others, but the food to be eaten will all be good food, too.

This angry naïveté reflected real themes of unity and revolution and displayed He Zhen's awareness of the relationship between gender and class. She firmly linked women's liberation to the notion of revolution, a remaking of society in political, economic, and class terms. Women's liberation depended on the liberation of all. Women were uniquely oppressed—half of society left out because of its gender—but not oppressed in unique ways. The roots of oppression lay in the unfair economic system; the solution lay in anarcho- communism's doctrines of sharing. He Zhen clearly believed in anarchism's motto, "To each according to need." She stipulated only that some work be done. Given women's universal inferiority in society, He Zhen focused on women in particular positions in a particular class society. She paid attention to poor women or poor and middle-class women, not to the rich. That even a rich woman might be oppressed by family, husband, bound feet, and duty was of less moment for He Zhen than that housemaids, women workers, and prostitutes, all of whose positions were determined in part because of their sex, had to choose immediately between subservience and starvation. On the other hand, the idea of dependence applied to wives and concubines as well—and to the overwhelming majority of men.

---

<sup>4</sup> This argument is laid out in "Wuzhengfu zhuyi zhi pingdeng guan" (The anarchist view of equality), TYB, nos. 4, 5, 7 (July 25, August 10, September 15, 1907), reprinted in Zhang and Wang 1978, 2B:918-32; also see TYB, 24-36.

failed to ask women to struggle for themselves. On a falling note, Li counseled young people desiring independence to appeal to their parents' memories of their own youths.

The Chinese anarchists in Paris and Tokyo sent one another copies of their journals, and He Zhen basically agreed with Li about causes: for several thousand years Chinese tradition had treated women as slaves and forced them to be subservient. Thus, He Zhen said, men had thought of women as private property that must be prohibited from loving other men and had established a political system and moral teachings (zhengjiao) that emphasized taboos (fang) and differentiation (bie) between men and women. Women were forced to live deep in the women's quarters;

Confucians defined "differentiation" as the ideal that married women should have no "outside concerns." As a result, she said, women became responsible for raising the children and running the household. Chinese religion valued having children—propagating the species so that descendants could maintain the ancestor's spirits. The political order then treated children and grandchildren as property, and in popular opinion fertility was equated with wealth. Thus, men finally reduced women to something for nourishing the species (renzhong yangcheng).

According to tradition, women have duties but do not have rights[...] Diligently working on household matters is not something that men can do, but they have given women the responsibilities of service. They are also afraid that women will interfere in their affairs and so they abrogated the natural rights (tianfu zhi quan) of women with the theory that women have nothing to do outside the home. On the basis of the former theory that women have no rights) men allow themselves to live in idleness while they make women work. On the basis of the latter theory (that women have no business outside the home), men try

not enforced by law, it is still custom and habit and above all is enforced by such superstitions as receiving imperial honors and temple acknowledgments. Any time a man no longer loves his wife, he has the right to get rid of her. There are the "three followings" and the "seven expulsions"; all the rights are on the man's side. If the man likes other women, he can take second wives and concubines. Women cannot [...] If a man can have other women, a woman ought to be able to have other men. This would be a start toward justice.<sup>6</sup>

Not, Li thought, that the Western nations were much better.

Li proclaimed that according to science women were equal to men in ability (nengli); women did what men could do in the countryside, and in Europe women were teachers, doctors, and the like. "That today there are some who can do these things proves that they do not inherently lack the ability but are restricted." Li considered that male hegemony restricted women in two ways: by demanding that they "ought not" do certain things (the prohibitions of false morality) and by declaring that they "could not" do certain things.

"Thus women are unequal to men purely because of the techniques of the oppressors [qiangzhe] and not because of nature" (XSJ, 29). Li held that the problem of oppression was rooted in cultural attitudes. He attacked the Confucian notion of hierarchy, linking hegemonic techniques to Confucius, who said, "Only women and small people are difficult to deal with."<sup>7</sup> But break down the "superstitions" and the authoritarianism, and revolution will follow. On the one hand, Li thought that social change would come about by natural evolution; on the other, he predicted a "family revolution" that was itself a part of evolution. Either way, or both, he

---

<sup>6</sup> The "seven expulsions" refer to a man's right to divorce his wife for her failure to have a son, adultery, disrespect to her husband's parents, quarrelsomeness, stealing, jealousy, and severe illness.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Lunyu 17:25, trans. after Waley 1938: 216-17; the passage is sometimes interpreted as originally referring to concubines and (male) servants or the common people, not simply to women and men of lesser virtue.

Liu Shipai agreed on the centrality of economic analysis. He found the origins of inequality in class, labor, and sex.<sup>4</sup> As primitive shamans had evolved into an aristocracy and as occupational specialization had produced subservient laborers, so women had been turned into private property with the advent of complex societies. With war, for example, women of defeated tribes became booty.

Liu believed that inequality was the result of oppression, not nature. Men made polygamy into a kind of natural law only when women lost their freedom. Even in monogamous cultures women were seen as inferior (and prohibited from politics and the military). The result of these unnatural developments was dependence and servitude. Women, who were dependent on their husbands, were enslaved; workers, who were dependent on the capitalists, were enslaved. So too the people and their rulers.

None could claim equality. Liu defined "independence" (duli) as the opposite of dependence and servitude. Independence, liberty, and equality were basic human rights, and "we consider these three rights to be natural Tianfeng."

He Zhen condemned Western-style capitalism for turning women into "tools for producing wealth" (TYB, 75). And, she observed, this system was coming to China.

As men had traditionally been economic tools, so, too, women were now caught up in capitalism. He Zhen attributed the traditional sexual division of labor to the nature of preindustrial societies. In the present, however, she saw machines drawing women out of household handicrafts. In other words, before technology allowed capitalism to spread, women had played an economic role but one that was limited to the family (such as weaving). More specifically she saw that inflation, caused by unnecessary factory-made goods, was forcing women into the job market. He Zhen displayed a certain nostalgia; in her terms, handicrafts had been an example of free labor and free markets. Women had been able to make and sell such items as clothing—or could decide not to. But

factories and modern machinery had given the rich even more advantages over the poor. No poor person could now buy the equipment to establish a factory. No poor woman could compete against the goods that factories produced.

So they had to go to work for the capitalists.

He Zhen noted that women workers had become common in Western countries and Japan, and when she examined the working conditions in those countries, she found women forced to labor in factories in increasing numbers. If women workers got married and had children, they then had at least twice as much to do. Worse, husband and wife were barely able to survive even if they both worked. The slightest economic disturbance would wreck the home: "Work not only harms the women themselves but will destroy the peace of the home". He Zhen was not saying that the traditional position of the wife was superior, although perhaps she thought it could on occasion be a less exacting taskmaster; she was saying that it was in the nature of capitalism to present an unpalatable choice between economic servitude and starvation. He Zhen did not believe feudalism was superior, just that capitalism did not promise improvement of women's inferior position.

Capitalists only force countless women into selling their bodies [...] they make other people labor in order to become rich themselves. Then they force people into poverty and even use their poverty to increase their own wealth. Is this not the same as regarding laborers as no more than tools? Alas, people used to regard women as playthings; today, they regard women as tools. Regarding women as playthings insulted their bodies alone; regarding women as tools both insults their bodies and exhausts their strength. Truly the crimes of the capitalists reach to heaven.

The relationship between gender and class could only be broken by revolution. At the same time, a strong cultural and historical component fostered the oppression of women.

## Tradition and Confucianism

The anarchist Li Shizeng saw more progress in areas other than sexual equality.<sup>5</sup>

He blamed "authority" (qiangquan) for male dominance, but unlike the authority of rulers over ruled and rich over poor, which had undergone historical shifts, the positions of men and women had never changed. "Even today, other kinds of revolution have made advances, but the inequality between the sexes remains as dark as ever". The reason lay not in biology but in superstition. Fortunately, once people understood the truth they would begin to fight against "false morality," which Li defined as elements of traditional thought contradicting science and justice (kexue gongli). He contrasted science and superstition on four sexual questions. First, whereas science found no physiological differences between the sexes (except for genital organs), superstition reduced women to an inferior position on the irrelevant grounds that they got pregnant. Second, science had no problem with a woman's having two husbands; the offspring would not be tainted in any way. But superstition and false morality declared this improper,

in order to protect the positions of those in authority [men]. Men regard women as their playthings and don't want other men to take what they themselves enjoy. Nor do they want their playthings to love other men. Thus they have made up all kinds of rules to tie their women down, just because of their monopolizing and jealous natures. Not only that, but even when these men die, they still force their wives to remain [unmarried] widows. Although this is

---

<sup>5</sup> Li (1881-1973), the son of a powerful Qing official, moved to France to study biology in 1902 and became an anarchist there.